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KARL MARX: QUIETISM AND ACTIVISM
IN THE REVOLUTION

by



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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled KARL MARX: QUIETISM AND ACTIVISM IN THE REVOLUTION, submitted by David Leadbeater in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

ABSTRACT

Given Marx's general belief in the eventual breakdown of the capitalist system, there can arise the question of what is the role of human initiative in bringing about the revolution, within what seems to be a social determinism. Some have argued that a quietistic attitude is appropriate; others that an activist attitude is appropriate. The essay grapples with this apparent problem by examining Marx's essentially anti-metaphysical view of man as a social and historical being. Following from this view of man, there is discussion of such central matters as determinism, cause, law, contradiction, and overdetermination. The method of Capital is used to exemplify Marx's approach to human history; an understanding of this method helps to avoid problems usually generated in discussion of the capitalist 'breakdown'. I conclude that the problem raised in the essay is dissolved or recognized only as a pseudo-problem if we can grasp properly the nature and fundamental importance of social practice and reflection on social practice within the Marxist problematic.

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KARL MARX: QUIETISM AND ACTIVISM IN THE REVOLUTION

INTRODUCTION

It has been argued¹, and I think fairly, that Marx held throughout most of his lifetime a general belief in the eventual breakdown of capitalism.

But if, as for Marx, the breakdown of capitalism is inevitable, what role is there left for human initiative? Why be activist, a revolutionary, when facing this prospect of ultimate collapse? Or, perhaps, does one 'really' have the choice of whether or not to be a revolutionary?

These questions and others like them centre around an issue in Marx that has been the focus of a great deal of debate and controversy. An understanding of that issue and a possible way of dealing with it is what this essay attempts to achieve.

But first, let me try to clarify the issue to which I am referring. Given Marx's view of the inevitability of capitalist breakdown, there seems to be, at least in some quarters, two basic and opposed responses as to what is the proper attitude to take towards revolution. The first response suggests that the most reasonable consequent of Marx's view is an attitude of "quietism". The second response suggests an attitude of "activism".

Quietism I take to be that attitude which is characteristically passive, which includes the abandonment of the will in the face of historical, economic, or social forces. Activism, on the other hand, I take to be that attitude which indicates greater confidence in the actions and decisions of men to affect history. Besides recognizing the effectiveness of human actions, the activist attitude sees that historical events can be consciously purposive and intentional, although at times they may be without conscious purpose and intention.

In practical terms, an activist attitude towards revolution

¹For example, Paul Sweezy, The Theory of Capitalist Development (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1942).

can lead to such things as supporting and participating in political organizing, contestation politics, and the exacerbating of significant social contradictions, the intensification of struggle, the raising and escalating of political demands, and so on. In contrast, the quietistic attitude does not lead to this kind of political aggressiveness. It could take the form of abstention from political activity, the acceptance of certain laws, orders, regulations or customs without efforts to change or to protest, acquiescence when defeated or when setbacks are suffered, and so on.

The fact that there are real alternatives for a good many people makes the issue of quietism and activism in Marx of considerable practical importance. Moreover, the issue is also very significant from a theoretical point of view, for opponents of Marxism have used the difficulties involved in this issue to try to point out major internal contradictions within Marxist theory, and thereby side-step important elements of Marxist theory, such as the relation between theory itself and practice. Of the many attempts to point out contradictions in Marxist theory, one of the more frequent is directed towards what appears to be a contradiction between Marx's own activist attitude and his belief in the inevitability of certain historical events such as the 'breakdown'. The following quotation from Karl Popper is one such (questionable) attempt:

But as we already know, these strong activist tendencies of Marx's are counteracted by his historicism [general prediction of certain historical events]. Under its influence he became mainly a prophet. He decided that, at least under capitalism, we must submit to 'inexorable laws' and to the fact that all we can do is 'to shorten and lessen the birth-pangs' of the 'natural phases of its evolution'. There is a wide gulf between Marx's activism and his historicism, and this gulf is further widened by his doctrine that we must submit to the purely irrational forces of history.¹

So we are faced with the very important question within the context of Marxism as to whether or not the inevitability of a partic-

¹Karl Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), Vol.II, p.202.

ularly important historical event, the breakdown of capitalism, should affect one's attitude towards revolution. In effect, does Marx's belief lead to a quietistic attitude or an activist attitude towards revolution, or, indeed, is there simply no connection at all.

I begin by examining Marx's view of man's social situation.

CHAPTER I

THE HUMAN SITUATION

In a famous passage from the Preface to the Critique of Political Economy (1859) Marx writes:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.¹

The pertinent point here is that Marx recognizes there are developments in history which are "indispensable" and "independent" of men's will. An earlier, and less sophisticated formulation of this view is found in the German Ideology (1845-46):

The fact is . . . that definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations. Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production. The social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life process of definite individuals, but of individuals, not as they appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they really are; i.e., as they operate, produce materially, and hence as work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will.²

Still another, more general, formulation of this view is contained in the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: (1852):

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly

¹Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Works (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), p.182.

²Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The German Ideology, translated and edited by S. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), pp.36-37.

encountered, given and transmitted from the past.¹

The point to note here is that although Marx recognizes a determined element in human history, he also recognizes that "men make their own history", the element of human efficacy.

That Marx saw the need for political action and encouraged it is attested to by both his own writings, particularly his letters, polemics, speeches, and such documents as the Communist Manifesto, and The Critique of the Gotha Programme, and by his actions, particularly those within the International Workingmen's Association. Moreover, it was clear to him that a movement such as the revolutionary communist movement can make mistakes which are its own and thereby suffer setbacks, as well as make the right decisions and thereby achieve its goals. The following passage from a letter written by Marx in 1871 gives indication of the precarious character of the revolutionary struggle in history:

World history would indeed be very easy to make if the struggle were taken up only on condition of infallibly favourable chances. It would on the other hand be of a very mystical nature, if "accidents" played no part. These accidents naturally form part of the general course of development and are compensated by other accidents. But acceleration and delay are very much dependent upon such "accidents", including the "accident" of the character of the people who first head the movement.²

At the moment I will bracket the matter of "accidents". Suffice it to say for now that Marx considers some actions to be determined, and some others not to be so.

The question that next needs to be dealt with is how does Marx arrive at his view of human activity, both determined (by history) and determining (history). The answer begins with an understanding of man's situation in the world.

¹Marx and Engels, Selected Works, p.97.

²Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Correspondence, translated by I. Lasker, edited by S. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), p.264.

Social Man

Of fundamental importance in Marx's view of human activity is the realization that man is a social being. In acknowledging that man is a social being we are led to see him not as one human alone among a multiplicity of human 'atoms', but as, necessarily, part of a 'network' or 'web' of social relations. Marx emphasizes this point in several passages:

. . . But man is not an abstract being, squatting outside the world. Man is the human world, the state, society.¹

. . . But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each simple individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations.²

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. Those premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way.³

The implication of Marx's view is clear: human beings cannot be conceived of apart from their historical circumstances. To speculate about man apart from the real world misunderstands the actual nature of man, and leads to confusion, falsehood, and mystification through the posing and answering of misdirected, pseudo-philosophical questions. The importance of this position cannot be underestimated. All too often it is apprehended as merely a philosophical platitude. For Marx it is no platitude but the basis of critical enquiry about man and human history. Without such a starting point one cannot attain truthful and productive knowledge, understanding free of mystification and ideology. In at least this one respect, Marx's view of man is analogous to Wittgenstein's view of language:

¹Karl Marx, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, in Karl Marx: Early Writings, translated and edited by T.B. Bottomore (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), p.43.

²Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, in Selected Works, p.29.

³Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, p.31.

[It] . . . is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about.¹

As a social being man is also, necessarily, a producer:

. . . we must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history". But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. . The first historical act is thus the production of material life itself.²

Of course, man produces apart from those things needed directly to remain physically alive. Although he produces crops, hamburgers, tables and hammers, he also produces plays, physical theories, fugues, and systematic theologies.

They (animals) produce only under the compulsion of direct physical needs, while man produces when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom from such need.³

The character of human production will vary according to the particular social formation in which it is found. (By social formation I understand a particular configuration or structure of human relationships, most importantly, those defined by the economy). The organization of men in each social formation is principally the response of those historically situated persons to the needs of production. What comprises these needs is, again, dependent on the particular historical circumstances. Thus, the existence of particular, changing formations of needs continually 'propels' or 'energizes' the maintenance and development of social formations.

¹Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), remark 203. This analogy is noted in J.A. Brook, "Marx: Essence and the Problem of 'Social Determinism'", unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 1966, pp.9-10.

²Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, p.39.

³Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, in Karl Marx: Early Writings, p.128.

The second point is that the satisfaction of the first need (the action of satisfying, and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired) leads to new needs; and this production of new needs is the first historical act.¹

Talk about "needs" can, at least in some quarters, arouse considerable difficulties. When Marx discusses the matter he is referring not simply to some medically defined, biologically-based requisites for life. The meaning he intends is 'denser' than that; it includes the political, psychological, legal, and ideological as well, to mention a few. But the important point is that in Marx, needs are socially defined within the historical context. For example, it is generally accepted in our present social context as a need that there be available competent physicians, surgeons, and hospitals, and for the trade schools in which the physicians and surgeons are trained. It is also taken as a need that we have construction equipment to build hospitals and trade schools, and the dams which produce the electricity. It is also taken as a need that there be a system of highways, communications, and postal services, to facilitate the building and maintaining, and organizing of these institutions among others. And without further elaboration we can see a particular configuration of socially defined needs. We can also see quite readily that this configuration of needs is different from some of those found in much earlier historical circumstances, say as existed in Rome under Augustus.

It does not follow from this view that general statements about human needs cannot be made. By generalizing about human historical experience one can fairly say, for example, that man needs food, clothing and shelter. On the other hand, one cannot fairly say, for example, that man needs a competitive market society (or that his 'nature' is consonant with, or realized in, this particular social development alone). The significant point here is that on Marx's view one cannot make deductions about human needs based on things

¹Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, p.40.

independent of or external to man's actual, objective historical experience.

Even in the discussion of such a general and as yet unfulfilled need as the overcoming of alienation Marx pins his interpretations on historical experience. In the degradation of the working class he sees that 'truly human needs' are not met under capitalism, and that the structure of capitalism prevents this from happening. But with the breakdown of capitalism and socialist revolution it becomes possible to overcome alienation, to bring about new freedom, and to fill truly human needs. This important theme in Marx is rooted directly in human history. Marx sees not only the negative aspects of the life of the proletariat under capitalism, he sees also the 'seeds' of socialism, the presence of those values and attitudes which would bring about the 'new man'.¹ With socialism this weaker side in the developing proletariat would become dominant.

For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now.²

The outcome of a recognition of the social maintenance and development of needs is the realization that men are always changing,

¹See Paul Sweezy, "The Transition to Socialism", Monthly Review, 23 (May, 1971), 1-16.

²Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, p.45.

that social formations are always 'in motion'. The word which best characterizes this aspect of Marx's view of social existence is process. Marx is fully conscious of the problems of static models of any sort; man's world is constantly in flux.

Although needs themselves are in process this does not render impossible actual discussions about needs. In practice, we do just that. For example, it is quite possible to discuss whether we in this society 'really' need computers. There might even be a conclusion to the debate, which would probably centre around whether universities and computers could be disposed of without harm or with advantage. For Marx, the 'test of truth' for a conclusion is found in practice: when universities and computers are eliminated in the society is the result, advantageous, or of no significance. Of course, such discussions are generally theoretical (in ones like this they are probably worse -- 'academic') and find no solution until finally engaged actively in the concrete historical circumstance. The point, however, remains: discussions can and do take place on what are needs ('real' needs or 'good' needs) or 'what is to be done' -- and these are important questions -- but the questions must be related to specific historical circumstances. That relation can take place at different levels of generalization, but it must not neglect human historical experience.

A final point in this brief discussion of social man should be made concerning the individual and production. (A similar comment could be made in relation to needs). Obviously, production is carried on by individual men. (And needs are felt by individual men). But, necessarily, as social beings, and as producers, the production of individual men is a realization of their social nature in production. Man as an individual is social; and his individual production is social production. This, as can be seen, does not obliterate distinctions between individuals or individual production. Rather, it gives an understanding of man at a deeper level which may free us from an individualized or trivialized conception of human pro-

duction.

The activity of production and social labour must not be understood in terms of the non-specialized labour of the manual worker (although this labour does have its function within the whole); it must be understood on the scale of humanity. Production is not trivial. Labour must not be reduced to its most elementary form but, on the contrary, thought of in accordance with its higher forms; total labour then takes on its creative or 'poetic' meaning . . . the creation of man by himself.¹

The Process of Production

Production is a result of man's practical and theoretical activity. And the 'products' or objects of the process of production all have this in common; they are the results of man's practical and theoretical activity. (Later, I will mention the concept of 'practice', which includes both practical -- in the common, "down to earth" sense -- and theoretical activities. 'Practice' is similar to work, or engaged, active production, in any of its many forms). By objects I mean entities discernible or distinguishable, in some way (often by language) from general, indistinguishable, undifferentiated nature. Objects are determinate: they can be given definition, for example, by physical description from various points of view. In their social life men actively discern, distinguish, categorize, proximate, isolate, and 'pick out' certain portions of nature. In that men detach objects from a world that is undifferentiated (we would speculate: a world without man) they bring order to the world, organize it, and achieve some control over it.

Where Feuerbach saw the unity of man and nature expressed by man's being a part of nature, Marx sees man as shaping nature and his being in turn shaped by it. Where Feuerbach naturalizes man, Marx humanizes nature.²

One of the most obvious indications of man as an object-creating being is his differentiation of nature in language. In social prac-

¹Henri Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, translated by John Sturrock (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), p.129.

²Shlomo Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p.72.

tice objects are given designations. These names enter a particular language, can be deepened, extended, limited or otherwise changed in history, and can even drop out of usage. Of course, language is much more than simply a way of pointing to or naming objects, but this function is primary. It is because of language's capacity to 'detach' objects that it can, at least in part, be used to convey and create meanings.

Man is a natural being. By natural is meant incorporated into or part of the world, not in some sense foreign, alien, or 'not at home' in the world (with the rest of nature). Man cannot be thought of as a supernatural or wholly non-natural being, but he is distinguishable from other natural things by the fact that he is a self-conscious, self-critical, self-creating being. Although dependent upon and part of nature, man has a limited autonomy from nature, an ability to order and control nature. This is seen most obviously in his capacity to bear culture, something which is necessary (from an anthropological point of view) for him to be considered man. Culture, as the accumulation of languages, institutions, values, beliefs, and knowledge, is a burden for man; it is a necessary part of his existence that confronts him as a determinant in his life. But culture is also a power which allows man control, and an extent of independence from nature. In effect, in man's relationship to nature one can see both unity and opposition.

The way man differentiates Nature is not arbitrary or capricious. We could speculate that this might be the prerogative only of a being with "aseity" ("a se" -- from himself -- he depends on nothing outside himself in order to be). But man is not such a being: man is, necessarily, a social being. And therefore reasons for man choosing or arriving at the categories that he does are to be found in his social and historical circumstances. They are many and varied but all relate in some way to the particular character of social production.

In that man is determined by nature and also determines nature he is both the subject and object of nature. This is what Marx deals with

when he writes about men 'making' themselves but in certain conditions.

The dialectical and socio-historical character of Marx's view of human existence is now, perhaps, a little clearer. An example may further aid the case: a man attempts to establish a farm. He is 'forced' to act in certain ways according to such natural conditions as the soil, climate, weather, crop disease, and so on. He is also affected by the amount of help he can get in clearing the land, the state of development and availability of farm machinery, the condition of the grain markets, and so on. But the activity of farming also changes what he is working with. In establishing a farm he begins to organize and control his natural environment, and he produces crops for himself and the community. The activity of farming also changes the man himself. As he confronts and deals with problems and works to develop the farm, he establishes a greater understanding of what to do in his work. He grows in his knowledge of farming, he comes to view the world from the perspective of his own activity as a farmer in a particular social situation. So in the process of production there is an interaction of elements.

By virtue of reciprocal adaptation of men and object, the activity of this human group will acquire a form, a structure, and a rhythm . . . Every time human effort is applied to a 'product', a concrete unity is formed between subject and object, looked at practically. The subject and object are not merged, neither are they abstractly distinct; they are opposed in a certain relationship. They form a clearly determined dialectical whole.¹

Human beings bring about these dialectical oppositions in that their social activity encounters nature and seeks to define a relationship with it. Human beings also bring about these dialectical oppositions in another sense: it is they who posit this understanding of the relationship between social man and nature.

¹Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, p.120.

Objectivity and Truth

That men are creatures as well as creators of their world raises an important matter about their ability to judge the truth of what they perceive and understand. For in that man is limited by historical situation, and despite all his efforts, man can never attain a 'god's-eye-view', a position of 'truth' or 'objectivity' that is eternal or unaffected by history. Thus, it may seem, 'objectivity' and 'truth' are only myths: they cannot be realized.

At a superficial level, it might be possible to agree with the above formulation. But at a deeper level, and from a position within Marx's view, the idea is based on a false notion of the situation of man and of historical experience. In Marx's view, man is always subject to history and should not pretend that he can rise above it. Rather, the observer (subject) must see himself as well as his object historically, in the process of social development. The attempt to see men as transcendent gods who are apart and looking down at history is to set up an unattainable goal, and to fall into one of the traps of metaphysical thinking. This position does not imply that truth or objectivity are no longer useful in our vocabulary or that these matters are not of importance. On the contrary, the point is that Marx situates men and women in the historical 'stream', making them subject to history within certain limits. This means that matters of truth and objectivity are, in an important sense, contextual. That is, in the practical attempt to be true and objective, men must recognize their historical circumstances and, consequently, those forces which affect their decisions as subjects (or observers). Thus, Marx would insist we must remember that men, as subjects as well as objects, are located in real history where they must look at themselves to see if what is claimed to be true or objective might reflect their own interests or situation, or the society's ideology more than what is actually being described. This is the beginning of critical or reflexive historical thinking. Speculation about achieving a position of knowledge of all reality 'in itself', not dealing with the fact that

the subject is part of (not apart from) history, is a misleading, confusing, and ideologically 'loaded' way of approaching the problem of objectivity and truth.

The whole of reality "in itself", being beyond our practical perception, is also beyond our knowledge. Its parts, its species -- and thus also its properties, which allow it to submit to classification -- have only an "esse concessum", an existence granted not as a result of an arbitrary convention, but as a result of a perpetual dialogue between man's work and the object's opposition to it.¹

This "perceptual dialogue between man's work and the object's opposition to it" is man's practice,² and the major determinant of his consciousness. The sum of man's many kinds of practice in his social production. Man can truly understand his world only if he understands his production and the relationship of his production to the world.

For Marx, truth is closely related to practice. Whether a matter is true -- corresponds to what is actually the case -- is verified in practice. So if one's expectations or predictions are met, or looking at it a different way, if one's position 'works' or is efficacious, one has verified the truth-claim. This approach is not simply a glorified 'trial and error' method. It involves the accumulation of experience, analysis, and theory, and claims that the final

¹Leszek Kolakowski, Toward a Marxist Humanism, translated by Jane Zielonko Peel (New York: Grove Press, 1968), pp.48-49.

²Louis Althusser defines 'practice' as follows (in For Marx, pp.166-167): "By practice in general I shall mean any process of transformation of a determinate given raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means (of 'production'). In any practice thus conceived, the determinant moment (or element) is neither the raw material nor the product, but the practice in the narrower sense: the moment of the labour of transformation itself, which sets to work in a specific structure, men, means and a technical method of utilizing the means. This general definition covers the possibility of particularity: there are different practices which are really distinct, even though they belong organically to the same complex totality. Thus, 'social practice', the complex unity of the practices existing in a determinate society, contains a large number of distinct practices." Of the many forms of practice, economic production is primary, although practice includes class struggle, political work, scientific experiment, and artistic activities.

authority of truth for man resides in social practice. This approach does not aim in any way to depreciate the value of those theoretical or analytical activities which take place in conjunction with social practice or lead to social practice. What the approach does do is emphasize that knowledge must not be separated from the particular kind of social practice to which the claim under scrutiny relates. (Thus, in the Marxist tradition, a priorism is rejected). For example, the claim that bridges built in certain specified ways collapse, is verified in the practice of constructing the bridges and observing if they collapse, and by relying on previous experiences, not by any a priori principles.

A possible confusion may arise between two different uses of 'practice': practice when referring to human practice as a whole, including theoretical practice, and practice when used in the context of the theory/practice distinction. I have noted that theory is a type of practice and that theory must not be separated from practice. Furthermore, practice is understood as what is actually done, and not what is simply expected or presumed to be done. Critical theory, which demands an awareness of what is actually done, then becomes, in an important sense, dependent on knowing practice. In this way, practice becomes an object of scrutiny. And since theory is also a kind of practice, theory itself can become an object of scrutiny. In this connection, philosophy can be considered the practice of theorizing about the practice of theory. Now, perhaps, the distinction between the two uses of practice is becoming more clear. Practice, in the larger sense of human practice, refers to actual producing, activity, engagement, involvement: doing. Practice, in the sense contrasted with theory, refers to the object of theory or what theory is related to: what is done. The relation of the latter to 'revolutionizing practice', which will be mentioned later in the essay, now is more evident. Revolutionizing practice involves, most importantly, 'learning by doing', or, coming to know what is done by doing.

Marx's view of truth allows the possibility, quite reasonably, that things may be true prior to practice, that is, they may correspond to what is actually the case; but that truth can be vindicated or dem-

onstrated only in practice.¹ Drawing a clear distinction between truth and the test or proof of truth for it is one way of distinguishing the Marxist epistemology from that found in pragmatist thinkers such as William James or John Dewey. More importantly, it makes questions concerning objectivity or truth not abstract philosophical issues but practical and public matters:

The question whether truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. In practice man must prove the truth, that is the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.²

Thus, within the Marxist problematic the question of truth as approached metaphysically is not capable of being posed meaningfully, let alone answered. Once again, the reason centres around Marx's view of man as, necessarily, a social being.

. . . Marx, following Feuerbach, argues that nature insofar as it is for man cannot be detached from its human significance. There does not exist a nature, without human significance, and then man. There is only nature at the human level neither objective or subjective -- nature produced by man, that is to say, seen, touched, tested, worked upon, and transformed by a living being.³

The above quotation (which has an Hegelian slant) underlines the fact that claims of truth and objectivity are the productions of man. But they are not simply creations in abstract, but the result of man's activity in a real, objective world. Consequently, as Marx notes, in the particular historical context it becomes a practical issue whether the claims of men and women are true or objective.

In no way does this imply Marx denies that men and women make judgments or evaluations in determining the truth of objectivity of

¹See André Glucksmann, "Politics and War in the Thought of Mao Ts-Tung", translated and with an Introduction by Ben Brewster, New Left Review, 49 (May-June, 1968), 35-37.

²Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, II, in Selected Works, p.28.

³Jean Hyppolite, Studies on Marx and Hegel, translated and edited by John O'Neill (New York: Basic Books, 1969), p.98.

claims.¹ He simply makes the point that claims can be true or false, or more or less objective. The human situation is such that claims can never be free of judgment or evaluation. The demand for truth and objectivity is not pre-empted because of the existence of human beings as subjects in history. Here a distinction must be made between being a subject, and being subjective, which is more a disposition, attitude, or approach to objects.

In my view, experience indicates that the absence of speculative views of truth in our language does us little harm (and probably much good). For instance, we apply the word "truth" to some theories whose acceptance as truth may be limited or quite relative (in the speculative sense). The cause of a certain disease, X, may be discovered: Q. The solution, Q, suffices for medical work, and we still call the theory "true". Also, we can see that the phrase "true so far as we (I) know" is common and not apparently contradictory in common usage.

In Marx's context, "objectivity" also retains its meaning. In fact, Marx himself uses the word often, particularly in relation to scientific matters. The call for objectivity in Marx is not a call for man himself to remove himself from history, but a call for individual men and women to create a view of the world and their own situation which is free from various philosophical, ideological, and religious biases or distortion. (Again, this does not seem to be at variance with the common usage of the word). The path to such a position is through a process of critical scientific analysis of society and its many internal relations.

In short, within Marx's epistemology there seems to be no serious problems posed by the issues of objectivity and truth if one is willing

¹For interesting discussions of the fact/value distinction in this context see:

- Alan Montefiore, "Fact, Value and Ideology", British Analytical Philosophy, edited by Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 179-203.

- Bertell Ollman, "Is There a Marxian Ethic?: The Fact-Value Distinction", Science and Society, XXXV (Summer, 1971), 156-168.

to recognize the dialectical character of knowledge:

Like every product this object [of knowledge] has a natural side and a human side, an objective content and a subjective meaning, a concrete aspect and an abstract aspect.¹

In spite of the claim that Marx renders the concepts of truth and objectivity to positions of weakness and relativity, we can see that within Marx's problematic² this is not so. The very speculation that a greater certainty could be attained than that which is obtained through Marx's view of knowledge and human practice misunderstands the situation of man: it imposes a metaphysical (or speculative) world-view where Marx recognizes none exists. Alternatively, the speculation that certitude might or might not exist but man does not possess it, presupposes a (metaphysical) relation between knowledge and knower which does not exist; and leads us to skepticism. From skepticism, cynicism and inaction (quietism) are not far off.

¹Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, p.133.

²The concept of problematic rests on a recognition that the way one poses questions or the kind of questions one poses, and not just the answers themselves, are primary in determining the ideological content and situation of philosophical views. By problematic I understand a particular set of internally related ideas constituting a unity, which is reflected in the way questions are posed or in what matters are considered issues. In this sense, the problematic of a person or group of persons defines their focus of concern. Taking the matter further, Louis Althusser writes (in For Marx, p.67n.):

What actually distinguishes the concept of the problematic from the subjective concepts of an idealistic interpretation of the development of ideologies is that it brings out within the thought the objective internal reference system of its particular themes, the system of questions commanding the answers given by the ideology. If the meaning of an ideology's answers is to be understood at this internal level it must first be asked the question of its questions. But this problematic is itself an answer, no longer to its own internal questions -- problems -- but to the objective problems posed for ideology by its time. A comparison of the problems posed by the ideologue (his problematic) with the real problems posed for the ideologue by his time, makes possible a demonstration of the truly ideological element of the ideology, that is, what characterizes ideology as such, its deformation. So it is not the interiority of the problematic which constitutes its essence but its relation to real problems: the problematic of an ideology cannot be demonstrated without relating and submitting it to the real problems to which its deformed enunciation gives a false answer.

CHAPTER II

DETERMINATION

It has been noted that man's social practice (human production, particularly material production) differentiates and 'organizes' the various elements of his world. As well as being able to pick out objects themselves, man can apprehend connections or relations between objects, both temporally and spatially. It is the recognition of temporal or historical connections between objects (or isolated events -- they are the same as I have understood the term 'objects') that will be of primary interest in this chapter.

Determination

A determination is the result of attributing connection, strict linkage, between events. Although this might not be equated fully with "cause" in some philosophical quarters, I suggest that in relation to common usage, and certainly for my purposes, determination and cause can be equated, and used interchangeably. So in referring to a series of phenomena with a "cause" or a "determination" (or a "determinism") I convey a similar meaning:

This series [of phenomena] is isolated in time, just as the combination of objects is isolated in space. Such a grouping of phenomena, 'consolidated' in time, is known . . . as a determinism.¹

For example, someone might jump on a table. The table breaks in two. What determined (caused) the table to break in two? The answer one could give: the jump. And what caused the jump? Perhaps, the person involved went mad. And why did the person go mad? Perhaps, the seminar he was in drove him to this state. In a rather simplistic way a set of connections has been made: seminar and madness and jumping on the table and broken table. At least one determination (cause) is present in the broken table situation.

In the Marxist perspective, the attribution of a determination

¹Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, p.121.

must always be recognized as a production (creation) of man: determination is posited by man. Thus, determination is not dependent solely on the world which man encounters. This becomes obvious every time closer scrutiny falsifies a previous claim and a new determination is posited. The process is, again, dialectical; in their interaction with each other man and his world are changed -- new determinations are posited and the world comes to be understood in different ways by these, man's own, acts of positing.

As an object for man, a posited causal chain, or "series of objects isolated in time", has two sides. On the one hand, as it is created by man, it is abstracted, something separated or detached from nature. On the other hand, the series is seen as concrete, real, there. It is here that we can see the forming of a dialectical unity, produced in human practice. Depending on the problematic, the kinds of questions asked, and the type of activity involved, causal chains or series, 'genetic' connections, or determinations will be formed accordingly.

To point out the anthropomorphic character of determinations, or causal chains, is not to deny their need or even their utility. Indeed, it would be difficult to produce or even imagine a situation in many areas of human practice, not the least, political economy and history, where these terms and methods of analysis were not used. Still, there is no doubt that the concept of cause, in particular, has given a great deal of difficulty in the past. This essay is suggesting that understood within Marx's perspective causality is not problematical. And even if some would continue to insist that the word's history makes it inextricably problematical it is quite possible to use in its place "determination" or "determinism".

Abstraction

The human power of abstraction is a crucial element in the understanding of Marx and determination. Following Lefebvre I understood abstraction as "the ability to immobilize objects and instants, instru-

ments and concepts, in their separateness".¹ For instance it is possible to use abstraction with the following set of numbers:

1/1/3/2/4/5/3/9/9/4/16/12/5/25/15.

Although there are many possible connections or series or interrelatives to note we can isolate certain digits, for example, every third beginning with the second, and suggest a connection, in this example the squares of successive integers beginning with 1.

Similarly, in the earlier example of the broken table, the causal chain suggested was isolated from a great many possible factors or variables. The condition of the table (were there termites?), the humidity and temperature of the room, the reliability of the observers, and so on. The point to be made in both examples is that other elements could be isolated, but for various reasons concern was focused on two particular elements, in the first case, a simple answer to why did the table break, and in the second, a relation between at least some of a series of numbers.

In Marx's position, abstraction begins not with abstract principles, ideas or beliefs but with the real practice of men, human production.

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process.²

Working from this basis, abstraction can eliminate 'outside interference' or 'messiness' by isolating certain phenomena and excluding others, and then positing a relationship in the isolated phenomena:

Through the operation of abstraction outside disturbances are eliminated and the natural phenomenon reduced occurring in rigorously consolidated conditions. . . .³

¹Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, p.132.

²Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, pp.37-38.

³Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, pp.132-133.

The claim that is made about these 'rigorously consolidated conditions', probably a causal chain or determination, is, like the result of all men's creation in encounter with nature, a product, an isolated object. But history is in process -- it is continually being created by man -- and so even these 'theoretical' products can neither be complete nor can they be eternally untouched by historical circumstance.

Here again we must come back to the dialectical character of products of the process of abstraction. Abstraction involves the use of the categories and the identity relationships of formal logic, but it cannot give adequate expression to the character of process or becoming that is present in human products or the character of human products in active relation to the human and natural, the objective and subjective, and the concrete and abstract.

Formal logic is the logic of the instant, of the assertion and the object isolated and protected in their isolation. It is the logic of a simplified world: this table (considered independently of any relation with the activity of creation, and leaving aside the ravages of time) is obviously this table, while this lamp is not that book. Formal logic is the logic of abstraction as such. Language is subject to it, as being a set of symbols which serve to communicate as isolated meaning and which must keep the same meaning during the verbal transmission. But the moment the Becoming or activity have to be expressed, formal logic becomes inadequate.¹

Laws

In some areas of human activity, for example, the sciences, certain phenomena are abstracted and organized in such a way as to become laws. What distinguishes a law from other products of abstraction is that the law claims the sequence or pattern of the isolated phenomena has an unvarying uniformity under the same conditions. This is no ordinary determination; it suggests that, given the circumstance to which the law applies, similar results will obtain in like circumstances.

¹Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, p.37.

Because laws, particularly simple laws, are abstractions, they do not replicate the actual situation to which they apply, and in this sense they apply to situations ("ideal") which do not exist. This is seen in the set of conditions which apply to any law. Conditions are ways of preventing the intrusion, excluding the phenomena from the isolated or limited range of phenomena which are selected in a particular law. In this way, and thus, like other determinisms, the determinisms posited in a law are relative and approximate.

The physicist either observes physical phenomena where they occur in their most typical form and most free from disturbing influence, or, wherever possible, he makes experiments under conditions that assure the occurrence of the phenomenon in its normality. In this work I have to examine the capitalist mode of production, and the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode. Up to the present time, their classic ground is England. That is why England is used as the chief illustration in the development of my theoretical ideas.¹

It would be a mistake to treat laws as ideal and relegate the phenomena one is concerned with to a lower position because somehow they do not 'come up to the ideal'. The point is that laws by their (abstract) character are approximate. To expect experience to correspond exactly to laws is misguided in that it does not recognize the nature of laws. And to expect human practice, which is also a phenomenon, to correspond to laws is, thus, also misguided.

The relative and approximate character of laws can be seen in the growth of our knowledge through the overthrow of some laws and the development of new ones.² A goal of the sciences is the increase in understanding of natural laws -- the positing of determinations. But the creation of man's world is precarious; we must constantly be critical of the determinations we have posited and be willing to admit their relativity.

¹Karl Marx, Capital, edited by Frederick Engels, translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967), Vol.I, p.8.

²See: - Norwood Russell Hanson, Patterns of Discovery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

- Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

We have got therefore to be examining critically the degree of determinism we have attained, whose truth can be found only in later, more extensive determinations, in which the critique of this determinism is reunited with the analysis of the activity which produced it. The degree of determinism reached by a certain science can only ever be thought of therefore as a moment.¹

The Multiplicity of Determinations

To this point we have dealt with fairly simple causal chains -- A causes B causes C and so on. The approach has been very linear, indeed. Fortunately, it is not sufficient and probably misguided to base analysis, particularly, social analysis, on (linear) causal chains or series of determinations. Whether it takes the form of trying to fill in 'missing links' in the chain or extending linear connections further backwards or forwards, certain difficulties can arise both in theory and in practice. (One such difficulty is mechanism, something which will be discussed later.)

Now it is clear that human practice exposes numerous causal chains or linear genetic connections. These posited connections are all related to one another in that they are all products:

We must not picture physical Nature to ourselves as a juxtapositioning of sum of determinisms external one to another. Every determinism is a product: not an abstract construct of the pure intelligence but a product of the Praxis. The sum-total of determinisms is thus a vast product of activity, an immense object: the world.²

Once the existence of a multiplicity of genetic connections is recognized at an abstract level, we are faced with the problem of how to relate them at the concrete level. For example, in the broken table case, we might find that the table was riddled with termites and that the temperature of the room was so cold the night before as to put cracks in the table top. In this case, then, we can say without much

¹Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, p.141.

²Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, p.143.

trouble that termites and temperature, as well as jumping were determinations. But can we fairly say that the termites and temperature changes were determinations in the same way that the jumping is a determination? After all, it was only when the mad student jumped on the table that it actually broke. Furthermore, we do not know whether the table would have broken by the jumping had there been no termites or temperature changes.

Lefebvre suggests that these may be two types of causes: the first type are those causes which are easily isolated and grouped such as jumping in the broken table example or Q in the disease example. The second type of causes are that which are intrusive, or, "contributory".¹ For example, the presence of gravity in the first, or blood in the second, both of which seem presupposed, must be present but do not seem to have the same character as the first type of determinations. It is these second type of causes which are more easily 'isolated out' in abstraction, leaving the first type (which, in practical life, interests most people). However, in the activity of abstraction it must be recognized that there are, in fact, a multiplicity of determinations interacting at the concrete level. In the next chapter I will propose a way of understanding the interaction of the different types of determinations.

The Undetermined Sector

I have pointed to the 'unfinished' character of man's world: it is continually in process with new determinations replacing older ones and with man attempting to increase his control with an increase in the "degree of determination".

. . . the immobilization of the product (determinations) is never complete, from the side of Nature (which always reclaims the objects man has sought to abstract from it) any more than from the side of activity, which is always moving on towards fresh determinations.²

¹Morton White, The Foundations of Historical Knowledge (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p.105.

²Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, p.133.

The effect of this situation is that there exists for man a sector which is undetermined, a sector in which man has not or cannot posit determinations. Lefebvre calls this sector "uncontrolled" (by man).

A previously suggested point also leads to a recognition of the existence of this sector. That is, in the process of abstraction we have seen how certain (contributory) factors are excluded in analysis. Among those things excluded are instances of the undetermined sector.

Every determinism is subtracted, by means of a practical and hence, in one sense, objective operation, from the indefinite reality of Nature, from outside disturbances, and from all effects of chance qua chance.¹

The undetermined sector is undetermined in the sense that man has not posited determinations which allow him to control and know this sector in his practice. Since there is an undetermined sector which man is unable to control or know through his practice, we must allow for the existence of "accidents", events which are not determined -- chance. In a similar vein, while speaking of the relation of base to super-structure, Engels writes:

There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events, whose inner connection is so remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent, as negligible) the economic movement finally, asserts itself as necessary.²

The recognition of the existence of an undetermined sector is also a result of human practice. The experience takes several forms:

There remains an immense sector outside of man's control. Where Nature is concerned, this controlled sector is, for man, fatality or brute chance. Within man himself, it is known as pure spontaneity, the unconscious, or else as his psychological or social destiny. It includes everything which human activity has so far been unable to orientate and consolidate, everything not yet 'produced' through man and for man.³

¹Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, p.135.

²Marx and Engels, Selected Correspondence, p.417.

³Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, p.137.

To suggest that the undetermined sector is not controlled or known by man through his practice is not to suggest either that it will not in part at some future point be under his domination or that it has not been 'explored' or 'probed' by man. Rather, it has been the domain of the more non-scientific activities such as poetry, music, art, literature, religion, and myth.

CHAPTER III

OVERDETERMINATION

In the last chapter it was shown how the recognition of determination can be treated within the context of Marx. In this way the Marxist position recognizes cause, genetic development, connection, and continuity in history. However, the Marxist position also recognizes conflicting historical forces, opposed elements, and discontinuities, in a word, contradictions.

As is the case with determinations, contradictions are posited by man in the dialectical relationship of man and his world.

This dialectical world outlook teaches us primarily how to observe and analyse the movement of opposites in different things and, on the basis of such analysis to indicate the methods for resolving contradictions.¹

Contradictions

Within the Marxist dialectical world view the recognition of the existence of contradiction is fundamental.

The law of contradiction in things, that is, the law of the unity of opposites, is the basic law of materialist dialectic.²

Contradictions develop within a particular unity. Both aspects of a contradiction are opposed, and yet interdependent. For example:

In war, offence and defence, advance and retreat, victory and defeat are all mutually contradictory phenomena. One cannot exist without the other. The two aspects are at once in conflict and in interdependence, and this constitutes the totality of war, pushes its development forward and solves its problems.³

In this way, no aspect of contradiction can exist without its opposite, just as war does not exist without opposed elements (and capitalism without opposed classes).

The opposition of forces within a particular unity, such as war, is the impetus of development. That development can take different

¹Mao Tse-Tung, Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tse-Tung (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), p.74.

²Ibid., p.70.

³Ibid., p.76.

forms or pass through various stages, but so long as the contradiction remains unresolved, development of the particular unity will continue. At any given stage of development, the relation between the conflicting forces of struggle can vary as, for example, one army can for a time be more powerful than another, yet later on be weaker. This varying relation between the aspects of a contradiction is dependent on the given conditions of the particular contradiction. At times it may appear as though the two aspects of a contradiction are no longer in opposition or struggle even though the contradiction remains. For example, in the proletarian revolution the exploited class is turned into ruler and the exploiting class is ruled. However, this change in positions in no sense eliminates the contradiction of a class society. The goal of the revolution must be to bring society to a stage where class contradictions do not exist because classes do not exist. Another case may be one in which two groups fighting in a civil or revolutionary war join forces temporarily against a common third enemy. The contradiction may not have been resolved but for a period it is submerged.

The relations between the two aspects of a contradiction have been given several names. Althusser describes them in terms of "condensation", "displacement", and "fusion". Mao has several others.

Identity, unity, coincidence, interpenetration, interpermeation, interdependence (or mutual dependence for existence), interconnection or mutual co-operation -- all these different terms mean the same thing and refer to the following two points: first, the existence of each of the two aspects of a contradiction in the process of the development of a thing presupposes the existence of the other aspect, and both aspects coexist in a single entity; second, in given conditions, [my underline], each of the two contradictory aspects transforms itself into its opposite.

This is the meaning of identity.¹

At a point in the development of a contradiction there arrives a stage of antagonism within a unity which results in the transformation of the unity. For instance, exploiting and exploited classes have

¹Mao, Selected Readings, p.96.

existed together in the same society for long periods of time, with the expression of contradiction between the two classes taking place in class struggle. Yet at a certain stage the contradiction becomes antagonistic and revolution takes place. If the revolution is successful society is transformed and class exploitation is ended.

The importance of contradiction to Marx exists in his analysis of the social process:

When Marx and Engels applied the law of contradiction in things to the study of the socio-historical process, they discovered the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, they discovered the contradiction between the exploiting and the exploited classes and also the resultant contradiction between the economic base and its superstructure (politics, ideology, etc.), and they discovered how these contradictions inevitably lead to different kinds of social revolution in different kinds of class society.¹

In a complex entity such as capitalist society there are numerous contradictions, all operative in various ways. (Whether the term "conflict" replaces the more technical "contradiction" makes no appreciable difference descriptively as long as opposition within a given unity, society, for example, is the basic meaning intended.) Acknowledging the existence of these contradictions leads to the question of how they are related in the historical process.

The Multiplicity of Contradictions

In the multiplicity of contradictions, one contradiction in each unity is dominant; this is the "principal" contradiction, other contradictions are "secondary". In capitalism the principal contradiction is between the relations of production and the forces of production which is essentially the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Secondary contradictions might exist between non-monopoly and monopoly capitalists, between multinational and national capitalists between the ruling class in municipal and federal governments, between the farming class and the bourgeoisie, and so on.

¹Mao, Selected Readings, p.87.

Every contradiction, whether it be principal or secondary, has its principal and secondary aspects. For example, at various times the bourgeoisie may be extremely strong and united, having crushed activity among the trade unions, eliminated communist and socialist parties, denied bourgeois democratic and legal processes, and integrated the capitalist class into the ruling government. Such a situation might be found in fascism. At other times the proletariat may be very strong in relation to a divided or weakened bourgeoisie. This type of situation might be found preceding a revolution. In both periods the bourgeoisie is the principal aspect of the contradiction, although in the second the proletariat is changing its position. With revolution the proletariat becomes the principal aspect of the contradiction and the secondary aspect, the bourgeoisie at this point, gradually fades from view (unless there is a counter revolution) and the old form of society is superceded.

Every contradiction is characterized by "uneven development" as exemplified above.

In any contradiction the development of the contradictory aspects is uneven. Sometimes they seem to be in equilibrium, which is however only temporary and relative, while unevenness is basic. Of the two contradictory aspects, one must be principal and the other secondary. The principal aspect is the one playing the leading role in the contradiction. The nature of a thing is determined mainly by the principal aspect of a contradiction, the aspect which has gained the dominant position.¹

Within any given situation there exists a multiplicity of contradictions and determinations. It is now important to develop an understanding of how these are related.

Overdetermination

The concept of overdetermination is a means of dealing with the relation to each other of the multiplicity of contradictions and determinations. Initially, it is best understood from a descriptive

¹Mao, Selected Readings, p.91.

point of view. The following rather lengthy passage from Althusser describes the multiplicity of contradictions as they pertain to the October Revolution and Lenin's theory of 'the weakest link':

. . . in the 'system of imperialist states' Russia represented the weakest point. The Great War had, of course, precipitated and aggravated this weakness, but it had not by itself created it. Already, even in defeat, the 1905 Revolution had demonstrated and measured the weakness of Tsarist Russia. This weakness was the product of this special feature: the accumulation and exacerbation of all the historical contradictions then possible in a single state. Contradictions of a regime of feudal exploitation at the dawn of the twentieth century, attempting ever more ferociously amidst mounting threats to rule, with the aid of a deceitful priesthood, over an enormous mass of 'ignorant peasants' . . . Contradictions of large-scale capitalist and imperialist exploitation in the major cities and their suburbs, in the mining regions, oil-fields, etc. Contradictions of colonial exploitation and wars imposed on whole peoples. A gigantic contradiction between the stage of development of capitalist methods of production (particularly in respect to proletarian concentration: the largest factory in the world at the time was the Putilov works at Petrograd, with 40,000 workers and auxiliaries) and the medieval state of the countryside. The exacerbation of class struggles throughout the country, not only between exploiter and exploited, but even within the ruling classes themselves (the great feudal proprietors supporting autocratic, militaristic police Tsarism; the lesser nobility involved in constant conspiracy; the big bourgeoisie and the liberal bourgeoisie opposed to the Tsar; the petty bourgeoisie oscillating between conformism and anarchistic 'leftism'). The detailed course of events added other 'exceptional' circumstances, incomprehensible outside the 'tangle' of Russia's internal and external contradictions [Althusser describes some particular events such as the development of the Bolshevik Party]. . . . In short, as precisely these details show, the privileged situation of Russia with respect to the possible revolution was a matter of an accumulation and exacerbation of historical contradictions that would have been incomprehensible in any country which was not, as Russia was, simultaneously at least a century behind the imperialist world, and at the peak of its development.¹

¹Althusser, For Marx, translated by Ben Brewster (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1969), pp.95-97.

In the Russian situation, which appears to have considerable complexity, we can see an accumulation of events and circumstances giving rise to revolution. Behind the multiplicity of 'gathering' contradictions was the principal contradiction: the contradiction between the relations of production and the forces of production which is embodied in the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and proletariat -- private ownership and social production. It was this contradiction, primarily, that was to be resolved in revolution. But the fact that this contradiction existed was not sufficient to make its aspects openly antagonistic and thus, revolutionary.

. . . the general contradiction [the principal contradiction . . . is sufficient to define the situation when revolution is the 'task of the day', it cannot of its own simple, direct power induce a 'revolutionary situation', nor a fortiori a situation of revolutionary rupture and the triumph of the revolution. If this contradiction is to become 'active' in the strongest sense, to become a ruptural principle, there must be an accumulation of 'circumstances' and 'currents' so that whatever their origin and sense (and many of them will necessarily be paradoxically foreign to the revolution in origin and sense, or even its 'direct opponents'), they 'fuse' into a ruptural unity: when they produce the result of the immense majority of the popular masses grouped in an assault on a regime which its ruling classes are unable to defend.¹

The relation of the multiplicity of contradictions and determinations pointed to above is what Althusser calls "overdetermined contradiction" and "overdetermination". This mode of analysis is particularly important because it is dialectical; unlike a strictly linear analysis, the positing of overdetermination recognizes a dynamic interaction of forces or determinations to form a conjecture. There is no single determination or cause, no single contradiction which gives rise to the conjecture and the historical possibilities which it creates or denies.

. . . the 'contradiction' is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal conditions of existence, and

¹ Althusser, For Marx, p.99.

even from the instances it governs; it is radically affected by them, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various levels and instances of the social formation it animates; it might be called overdetermined in its principle.¹

Since contradiction is embedded in particular historical situations and cannot be taken apart from them, it follows that contradictions must also be affected by the determinations which 'intersect' their path of development. We might talk of contradiction by itself without any 'interfering' determinations, but such an entity does not exist.

In short, the idea of a 'pure and simple' non-overdetermined contradiction is, as Engels said of the economist turn of phrase 'meaningless, abstract, senseless'.²

Let me take the earlier example of the broken table. We do not know whether the table would have broken had there been no termites or temperature change. There is some reason to believe that the termites and temperature change at least contributed to the break, but we cannot isolate these factors out so as to know if the break would have occurred without the jump. What we do know is that various events have come together in a concrete situation. Furthermore, we cannot pick out the relative importance of each of the determinations without some implicit or explicit theory of breaking tables. It must be stressed that the basis of the concept of overdetermination is to locate determinations within actual, complex, interrelated history. Also, in Marx the role of the subject or observer is critical; the understanding of overdetermination must take into account the dialectical interaction of subject and object in history. Viewed in this fashion, the observer can become a determinism, contributing to an overdetermination.

I have based the above understanding of the concept of overdeterminism on essentially descriptive grounds. However, from a theoretical point of view that concept is non-reducible to description

¹Althusser, For Marx, p.101.

²Ibid., p.113.

alone because it is a necessary component of a Marxist understanding of history. Although overdetermination can be verified or legitimated in practice, the support for positing it does not derive so much from this kind of legitimation as from Marx's theory of history. There can be no adequate way of understanding Marx's theory of history unless the concept of overdetermination is introduced. The concept enables a clear understanding of the development of bourgeoisie to proletariat and superstructure to bases, to name just two very important elements in the theory. With this structural principle in mind it is possible for social scientists to have a guide in analysis and the selection of data. Without this organizing principle we are left in a situation where the relationship of various elements in analysis, for instance the relation of base and superstructure, may be misunderstood or distorted. A good example of this difficulty is seen in some discussions of the relation of base to superstructure. Marx's Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy¹, and Engels' letter to Bloch (September 21-22, 1890)² which suggests that "the economic finally asserts itself as necessary" and that economic conditions are "ultimately decisive", are prone to interpretation in ways which do not recognize a fundamentally dialectical, non-linear, approach to the problem. (Even Engels himself could be accused of lapsing into this approach; Marx is more subtle in dealing with the issue.) The result of this difficulty has been a distortion of the Marxist position which has created more problems than it has solved, including (at least in part) the major one faced in this essay.

Ideological Distortion

At this stage it will be useful to consider some distortions that have taken place historically in the understanding of Marx's position. First let me state explicitly some things I have attributed to Marx:

a) Marx did not use a basically linear, causal mode of analysis, but a

¹Marx and Engels, Selected Works, p.181.

²Marx and Engels, Selected Correspondence, p.417.

basically dialectical mode of analysis, which recognized the interaction of both subject and object in history.

b) Marx did use determination and cause but within the general dialectical mode of analysis. Determination and cause can best be understood through the structural principle of overdetermination or overdetermined contradiction.

c) Marx rooted his categories and analysis in social practice and not in any sort of transcendental deduction, or deductions abstracted from ideals or first principles. In this way he stands opposed to a priorism of any kind, especially 'idealist' philosophy, which is considered to be an ideology of the bourgeoisie.

d) Marx also takes a position against empiricism (which is generally idealist) or any of its variants which claim that the legitimacy of categories rests upon their being reducible to sensible phenomena themselves. Marx permits, and in the process of abstraction recognizes, the necessity of the use of theoretical entities, objects which strictly speaking do not correspond exactly with any particular sensible phenomena.

Distortion of Marx's position generally arises out of the violation of any or all of these elements. Particular distortions have been the result of simple misunderstanding, but they have also been the result of the 'use' of Marx's position to fit and legitimate specific political and ideological interests. Because of the latter historical experience it is worthwhile to point out a few of these ideological distortions.

Mechanism

Mechanism understood as the attribution, implicit or explicit, of a mechanical relation between phenomena, arises in a process which is fundamental in human activity: the integrating of fragmentary experience into a coherent 'world'. When this fragmentary experience is based on numerous series of causal chains or determinisms a serious problem can arise if the whole is taken as the same as the fragmentary

experience. In other words, the sum-total of the fragmentary experience is taken as constituting a world based on causal chains or determinations. Moving "from the isolated product to the sum of products and, simultaneously, from consideration of this fragmentary activity to that of the creative activity as a whole"¹ involves a significant shift of scale.

It has been pointed out that, taken in the whole, man's world is constituted of more than the linear connections of causal chains and determinations. Contradiction and overdetermination, and even an undetermined sector are also parts of his world. The isolated or detached character of determinations which eliminates what might be considered accidents or chance has also been pointed to.

Now if the world is taken to be constituted of a totality of linear connections such as cause or determination we are firmly into the distortion of mechanism. Furthermore, it is easily forgotten that determinations have a subjective as well as an objective side, that determinations are limited and approximate. This by itself, or coupled with an ignoring of the undetermined sector of man's experience, can lead to mechanistic fatalism.

Mechanistic models have been pictured in terms of vector sum models,² but this is only a more sophisticated form of mechanism. The vector sum model suggests that there are basic atomic phenomena which comprise the world and act in ways which are dependent upon various forces of the world. For man the world is in a continual process of flux. Man "comes to grips" with his constantly changing world in the categories which he creates. The categories are created in the context of man's practical needs and his attempt to control nature. In this way there is no "natural classification of the world".

No epistemological absolute exists, either as reality in itself which "is reflected" in consciousness, or as a sense impression, or a cogito, or innate categories of the mind,

¹Lefebvre, Dialectical Materialism, p.126.

²See Engels' letter to Bloch, September 21-22, 1890, in Marx and Engels, Selected Correspondence, p.418, and a criticism in Althusser, For Marx, pp.117-128.

or pure nonpsychic phenomena. The only accessible world that exists is the endless conflict between social man's needs and the natural environment as the possible means of satisfying them. In this process there is nothing we can interpret as fixed and elementarily obvious, eluding all further control and demanding that we accept it as a "primal fact". Nor is there any epistemological analysis that can enable us to distribute the contents of our knowledge over primary elements, the indivisible and the unverifiable atoms of consciousness.¹

Thus, for Marx, there are no basic atomic components of the world which interact with each other in determinate ways. Mechanism, which is based generally on this type of (logical) atomism, is, thus, certainly not in line with any non-distorted Marxist position.

Economism

Economism is a variant of mechanism, it is found in interpretation of Marx or in 'Marxist' analysis that approach the relation of base to superstructure in a mechanistic way. Typically, the economy is given a position as the (sole) determining factor in historical development. The superstructure merely reflects the economic base. In Marx's own analyses² it is evident that many factors dialectically interact and are determinant. The superstructure has an independence as well as a dependence on the base; in other words, as with man in relation to nature, the superstructure does have independence but within certain limits set by the base and preceding superstructural forms.

Technologism

Technologism is, likewise, a variant of mechanism and is similar to economism but that the basis of historical development is said to reside, in particular, in technological development.

¹Kolakowski, Toward a Marxist Humanism, p.54.

²For example, see Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, in Selected Works, p.95.

The first part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the general principles of the theory of the structure of the atom. It is shown that the structure of the atom is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, which are based on the principle of the uncertainty of the position and momentum of the particles. The second part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the structure of the nucleus. It is shown that the structure of the nucleus is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, which are based on the principle of the uncertainty of the position and momentum of the particles.

The third part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the structure of the molecule. It is shown that the structure of the molecule is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, which are based on the principle of the uncertainty of the position and momentum of the particles. The fourth part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the structure of the crystal. It is shown that the structure of the crystal is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, which are based on the principle of the uncertainty of the position and momentum of the particles.

The fifth part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the structure of the liquid. It is shown that the structure of the liquid is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, which are based on the principle of the uncertainty of the position and momentum of the particles. The sixth part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the structure of the gas. It is shown that the structure of the gas is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, which are based on the principle of the uncertainty of the position and momentum of the particles. The seventh part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the structure of the plasma. It is shown that the structure of the plasma is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, which are based on the principle of the uncertainty of the position and momentum of the particles.

The eighth part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the structure of the solid. It is shown that the structure of the solid is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, which are based on the principle of the uncertainty of the position and momentum of the particles. The ninth part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the structure of the liquid crystal. It is shown that the structure of the liquid crystal is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, which are based on the principle of the uncertainty of the position and momentum of the particles. The tenth part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the structure of the superconductor. It is shown that the structure of the superconductor is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, which are based on the principle of the uncertainty of the position and momentum of the particles.

Reductionism

Any form of reductionism, such as positivism, empiricism, scientism, or operationalism (the elimination of all operationally undefined -- as in experiments -- terms or categories), which considers as knowledge only those entities which can be reduced to sensible phenomena. For Marx, abstractions are non-reducible.

The world as it is conveyed to man's knowledge and as it is communicable in language is a world composed of abstractions; one arrives at the individual only through intermediary of abstract and general concepts. Traditional empiricism, which presents cognition as the creation of concepts abstracted from individual observations of the properties of species, introduces the basic fact of consciousness: the indispensibility of general knowledge to the perception of the concrete.¹

Thus, Marx claims that for science (social science, scientific socialism) to exist there must necessarily be a distinction between appearance (sensible phenomena) and essence,² or agreement about non-reducibility of abstractions.

¹Kolakowski, Toward a Marxist Humanism, p.45.

²See: - Pradeep Bandyopadhyay, "One Sociology or Many: Some Issues in Radical Sociology". Science and Society, XXXV (Spring, 1971), 1-33.

- Norman Geras, "Essence and Appearance: Aspects of Fetishism in Marx's Capital", New Left Review, 65 (January-February, 1971), 69.85.

- Jean-Claude St. Onge, "Economic Determinism: Problems in the Theory of Social Formations", unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 1968, Chapter II.

CHAPTER IV

THE METHOD OF CAPITAL

In the first three chapters I have attempted to reconstruct an understanding of Marx's problematic as it relates to the central issue of the essay. In the process several different sources have been utilized to build this reconstruction. As a whole, I would argue it is defensible on two grounds. First, it is philosophically justifiable in its own rights. Secondly, and certainly as important, it is sympathetic and consistent with Marx's own view. In Chapter IV I continue from the preceding chapters by dealing with a specific matter which should make more concrete the previous discussion.

It has been noted that Marx held a general belief in the eventual breakdown of capitalism, a belief which follows from his understanding of the nature of the system itself. The present chapter will elucidate the particular way in which Marx's method, as exemplified in Capital, can help dissolve the straw men and misleading questions posed by some critics as following from this understanding.

Probably one of the single most prickly passages for critics of Marx is the following sentence from the Introduction to the First German Edition of Capital:

It is a question of these laws themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results.¹

One of the results to which Marx refers, is, of course, the breakdown: How we are to understand this passage depends on getting a clear view of the method of Capital.

Abstraction and Deduction

In Chapter II I discussed the general character of abstraction as found in Marx. In Capital, abstraction is the basis of Marx's method:

The value-form, whose fully developed shape is the money-form, is very elementary and simple. Nevertheless, the human mind has for more than 2,000 years sought in vain to get to the

¹Marx, Capital, Vol.I, p.8.

bottom of it, whilst on the other hand, to the successful analysis of much more composite and complex forms, there has been at least an approximation. Why? Because the body, as an organic whole, is more easy of study than are the cells of that body. In the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both. But in bourgeois society the commodity-form of the product of labour -- or the value-form of the commodity -- is the economic cell-form.¹

Via the "force of abstraction" Marx was able to do analysis at several different levels. The higher the level of abstraction the more "purified", "detached", or "isolated" is the object of analysis. Because the theoretical entities at levels of abstraction do not exist as such in "pure" form in the concrete or empirical world, we must be careful to distinguish various levels of abstraction from each other and from the concrete level. Each level is non-reducible to another.

Rigorous differentiation and interdependence of the levels of abstraction is one of the major aspects of the dialectical method, distinguishing it radically from the formal analytical method.²

Marx's method is also deductive³ (or deductive-nomological, using the formulation of Carl Hempel)⁴. That is, from the object(s) of analysis are deduced particular explanations or laws at a given level of abstraction. Marx operates by moving from a higher level of abstraction to a more concrete level of abstraction. In moving to lower levels, simplifying or hypothetical premises are dropped in successive stages so that the nearer one becomes to the concrete the more data or phenomena are actually taken into account. In this way the method moves from the more abstract to the more concrete, from the

¹Marx, Capital, Vol.I, pp.7-8.

²Theotonio Dos Santos, "The Concept of Social Classes", translated by Henry F. Mins, Science and Society, XXXIV (Summer, 1970), 173.

³Not surprisingly, the method has been called the "abstract-deductive" method. See Paul Sweezy, The Theory of Capitalist Development (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1942), p.11.

⁴See Carl Hempel, Philosophy of Natural Science (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

more general to the more specific. Thus, the method has been called the "method of successive approximations"¹ and the "process of progressive concretion".²

The kind of approximation present in the method is analogous to the drawing of a map. First, at a fairly indefinite level, one might draw the rough boundary of a country with a few major rivers. Continuing on one would begin to refine the main features and add others as one's knowledge of the geographical area progressed. In the end one would hope to have a reasonable representation of the area with the most detail possible.

Marx's use of abstraction does not remove or invalidate the importance of empirical (or concrete) reality -- the reality of actual human experience. On the contrary, at each level of abstraction explanations are deduced from an abstracted form of reality. The deduction in turn points to other phenomena at a lower level of abstraction. If something different than what is expected occurs, then countervailing reasons are found and incorporated into this level of abstraction. The process continues with supplementary hypotheses being added at every level in response to the particular configuration of phenomena upon which each level of abstraction focuses. In this way Marx's method involves a dialectical relation between the theorizing of each level of abstraction and the phenomena under consideration, all for the purpose of giving a more complete understanding of social reality.

The legitimate purpose of abstraction in social science is never to get away from the real world but rather to isolate certain aspects of the real world for intensive investigation.³

We can again see the definite contrast of this position to that of positivism. Marx distinguishes between phenomena and sensible phenomena, considers them irreducible, and is determined to get beyond sensible phenomena, beyond superficial appearances. Of Capital he wrote:

¹Sweezy, The Theory of Capitalist Development, p.11.

²Dos Santos, "The Concept of Social Classes", p.173.

³Sweezy, The Theory of Capitalist Development, p.18.

. . . it is the ultimate aim of this work, to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society.¹

Marx's Categories

We have seen that some of Marx's deductions are theoretical in that they are not realized in 'pure' form in particular historical circumstances. Similarly, Marx's categories are theoretical entities in that they are approximate and probably not observable in pure form in particular historical circumstances. Social class is such a category:

In England, modern society is indisputably most highly and classically developed in economic structure. Nevertheless, even here ~~the~~ stratification of classes does not appear in its pure form. Middle and intermediate strata even here obliterate lines of demarcation everywhere (although incomparably less in rural districts than in cities). However, this is immaterial for our analysis.²

Categories such as social class are essential to the Marxist position. Without them the method employed by Marx would yield the knowledge that it does. Marx himself realized the centrality, the fundamental importance, of certain categories such as social class in both theory and practice.

As for ourselves, in view of our whole past there is only one road open to us. For almost forty years we have stressed the class struggle as the immediate driving power of history, and in particular the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat as the great lever of the modern social revolution; it is, therefore, impossible for us to co-operate with people who wish to expunge this class struggle from the movement.³

The question that now arises is why did Marx choose the particular categories that he did? The answer is found in the method of his investigations. Beginning with history and the accepted categories of most of the economists of his time, he critically analyzed and developed these categories of political economy through abstraction. The

¹Marx, Capital, Vol.I, p.10.

²Marx, Capital, Vol.III, p.385.

³Marx and Engels, Selected Correspondence, p.327.

following passage from one of his most brilliant pieces of work goes through the procedure:

It seems to be the correct procedure to commence with the real and the concrete, the actual prerequisites; in the case of political economy, to commence with population, which is the basis and the author of the entire productive activity of society. Yet on closer consideration it proves to be wrong. Population is an abstraction, if we leave out for example the classes of which it consists. These classes, again, are but an empty word unless we know what are the elements on which they are based, such as wage-labour, capital, etc. These imply, in their turn, exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. Capital, for example, does not mean anything without wage-labour, value, money, price, etc. If we start out, therefore, with population, we do so with a chaotic conception of the whole, and by closer analysis we will gradually arrive at simpler ideas; thus we shall proceed from the imaginary concrete to less and less complex abstractions, until we arrive at the simplest determinations. This one attained, we might start on our return journey until we finally came back to population, but this time not as a chaotic notion of an integral whole, but as a rich aggregate of many determinations and relations.¹

Marx's categories were developed in his political practice, particularly his theoretical practice. All of the central categories are rooted in the general theory of history. They are necessary to that theory, and thus to the Marxist problematic as a whole. While the categories are necessary for the theory of history, they do not stand or fall in relation to their reducibility to observable history (although for my part observable experience provides considerable evidence) -- it is not simply a matter of empirical verifiability. For example, the category of social class:

In the last analysis, determination of the basic social classes of society is not a task of empirical observation but one for theoretical investigation of the mode of production that makes the society.²

This is particularly important when one realizes that Marx's categories are not applicable to any society at any time but limited to certain

¹Karl Marx, The Grundrisse, translated and edited by David McLellan (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p.34.

²Dos Santos, "The Concept of Social Classes", p.172.

historical circumstances dependent on the mode of production.

He (M. Proudhon) has not perceived that economic categories are only abstract expressions of these actual relations and only remain true while these relations exist. He therefore falls into the error of the bourgeois economists, who regard these economic categories as eternal and not as historical laws which are only laws for a particular historical development of the production forces. Instead, therefore, of regarding the political-economic categories as abstract expressions of the real, transitory, historic social relations, Monsieur Proudhon, thanks to a mystic inversion, sees in the real relations only embodiments of these abstractions. These abstractions themselves are formulas which have been slumbering in the heart of God the Father since the beginning of the world.¹

It is, however, self evident that a theory which views modern capitalist production as a mere passing stage in the economic history of mankind, must make use of terms different from those habitual to writers who look upon that form of production as imperishable and final.²

Marx's social practice was situated in the capitalist system. A thorough analysis of that practice from an historical point of view would probably give many reasons surrounding the development of Marx's problematic; in this sense Marx himself was overdetermined. Certainly, the persons Marx met and read influenced his development. Certainly, Marx identified with the proletariat and the problematic was developed in sympathy with them. (Mao states that dialectical materialism is "the philosophy of the proletariat".) Certainly, Marx thought his analysis of society was the most correct available -- it was true. Certainly, Marx felt that something had to be done about the world in which he lived -- a revolution was needed. And, no doubt, someone might want to consider Marx's moral energy, his curiosity, his intelligence, or even his toilet training.

In a way, the Marxist problematic, like all systematic world-views, forms a "circle": the basic elements of the position support

¹Karl Marx, "Marx to P.V. Annehov, December 28, 1846", Selected Correspondence, p.39.

²Frederick Engels, in the "Preface to the English Edition", Capital, Vol.I, 5.

each other. However, this particular circle is not simply of academic interest, floating above the world. Marx's categories are grounded in human historical experience.

The categories into which this world has been divided are not the result of a convention or a conscious social agreement; instead they are created by a spontaneous endeavour to conquer the opposition of things. It is this effort to subdue the chaos of reality that defines not only the history of mankind, but also the history of nature as an object of human needs -- and we are capable of comprehending it only in this form. The cleavages of the world into species and into individuals endowed with particular traits capable of being perceived separately, are the product of the practical mind, which makes the idea of opposition of even any kind of difference between it and another theoretical mind ridiculous.¹

In that Marx's circle is tied to history, it provides a way of understanding history, and more importantly, of changing the world.

The 'Iron' Laws

We have now come to a stage where the so-called 'iron laws' present in Capital can be considered. In Marx, the 'iron' laws are statements of regularity at high levels of abstraction which are realized at the concrete level only as tendencies. Marx is fully aware of the 'gap' between a law at an abstract level and the realization of the law at the concrete level.

Under capitalist production, the general law acts as the prevailing tendency only in a very complicated and approximate manner, as a never ascertainable average of ceaseless fluctuations.²

Such a general rate of surplus-value -- viewed as a tendency, like all other economic laws -- has been assumed by us for the sake of theoretical simplification. But in reality it is an actual premise of the capitalist mode of production, although it is more or less obstructed by practical frictions causing more or less considerable local differences, such as the settlement laws for farm-labourers in Britain. But in theory it is assumed that the laws of capitalist production operate in their pure form. In reality there exists only

¹Kolakowski, Toward a Marxist Humanism, p.46.

²Marx, Capital, Vol.III, p.161.

approximation; but, this approximation is the greater, the more developed the capitalist mode of production and the less it is adulterated and amalgamated with survivals of former economic conditions.¹

This factor does not abolish the general law, but it causes that law to act rather as a tendency, i.e., as a law whose absolute action is checked, retarded, and weakened, by counteracting circumstances.²

Perhaps one of the most perplexing of the 'iron' laws for commentators on Marx has been that called popularly "the law of increasing misery of the proletariat", or by Marx "the absolute law of capitalist accumulation".³ This law should be treated in the same way as Marx's other general laws; one cannot infer from the 'absolute general law of capitalist accumulation' a concrete prediction, but only a tendency.

This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation. Like all other laws it is modified in its working by many circumstances, the analysis of which does not concern us here.⁴

The important point to recognize is that as Sweezy writes, "the tendencies or laws enunciated in Volume I are not to be interpreted as direct predictions about the future".⁵ Although the general laws do not give direct predictions, it is the case that they should be realized as tendencies over fairly long periods of time. It is also the case that general laws 'point' the way to areas of data which should be considered as evidence to demonstrate the law. As an analysis moves from the abstract to the concrete, expectations of particular evidence are created. This is a sense in which prediction, or anticipation does apply. Take, for example, the following piece of Marxist economic scholarship:

¹Marx, Capital, Vol.III, p.175.

²Ibid., Vol.III, pp.234-235.

³Paul Sweezy suggests, in The Theory of Capitalist Development, p.19, that in this context the term "absolute" is used in the Hegelian sense of "abstract".

⁴Marx, Capital, Vol.I, p.644.

⁵Sweezy, The Theory of Capitalist Development, p.13.

But this is not the way capitalism usually works. In a period of moderate prosperity, to say nothing of a real boom, both businesses and individuals incur debts in order to expand, respectively, their capital and their consumption. In fact, it is precisely this borrowing to expand and spend which, apart from government action, is responsible for the general prosperity of the economy. Knowing this and taking into account the fact that the period since the Second World War has been characterized by low prosperities and brief and mild recessions, we should expect to find a more or less steady increase in private debts, not only absolutely but relatively to the physical growth of the economy as a whole. And indeed we are not disappointed. Table I presents figures for total private debt, Gross National Product and the percentage of debt to G.N.P. for selected years since the war.¹

TABLE I
PRIVATE DEBT (NET) (BILLION \$)

	Total Private Debt	G.N.P.	Debt as % of G.N.P.
1946	153.4	208.5	73.6
1950	276.8	284.8	97.2
1955	392.2	398.0	98.5
1960	566.1	503.7	112.4
1965	870.4	684.9	127.1
1969	1,247.3	932.1	133.8

In the above piece of analysis the level of abstraction is not very high. Consequently there is a greater likelihood that the approximation of the analysis will fit better with the facts. As it happens, the particular evidence (Table I) to which the reader is pointed does add weight to the validity of the analysis. Of course, it might happen that the particular evidence runs against the analysis, or at least is unclear. This would force the analysis to go to an even lower level of abstraction in order to explain the discrepancy by giving countervailing conditions or circumstances.

¹Paul Sweezy, "The Long-Run Decline in Liquidity", Monthly Review, 22 (September, 1970), p.5.

Some have claimed that Marx's method in Capital is, properly speaking, scientific.¹ Whether or not this is the case, and I think it is, an interesting question arises for this problematic as well as any other problematic which claims to be scientific. That is, what would constitute a falsification of the theory? The answer to the question is long and involved, but I am inclined to agree with Thomas Kuhn's solution.² Essentially, the criteria are rooted in history: the theory must be capable of accounting for as much known data as is available at the particular time; it must be useful in coherently organizing already known experience and pointing the way to new knowledge; it must have general acceptance by a community or group of persons who continue and develop their position(s) within this problematic; the theory is also dependent on the tenacity of those who hold the theory. Without these historical connections, a problematic and the theory(s) attached to it dies, which is the general form of falsification in history.

Fortunately, the Marxist problematic has tended to gain in strength. Over long periods of time historical tendencies have been recognized; the Marxist problematic has proven invaluable to several at least initially successful revolutions; and as history progresses it would not be outlandish to expect that other even more radical historical developments rooted in the Marxist tradition will take place. Of course, I recognize that these latter points would be contested by many; I simply wish to point out that in no way could the Marxist problematic be considered to have 'died' (or been falsified) in the aforementioned sense.

¹If an historical perspective is taken on the issue of whether or not Marxism, Marxist social science, is 'scientific', the results will be rewarding. Parallels can be drawn between the development of scientific socialism and revolutions in other areas of science. Thomas S. Kuhn and Louis Althusser are both important in this regard (although Kuhn does not deal specifically with Marxism); however, Engels in his Preface to the Second Volume of Capital (Vol.II, pp.14-16), is much earlier and in many ways at least on this matter, more directly revealing of Marx's scientific revolution. This Preface was written in 1893, but Engels broached this view even earlier in 1886 in the Preface to the English Edition (Vol.I, p.4.).

²See Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In the Introduction of this essay I set out to answer the question, does Marx's belief in the breakdown lead to a quietistic or an activistic attitude, or is there simply no connection at all. The preceding chapters have developed an understanding of Marx's problematic which can now provide an answer to the question.

The answer I propose, in a general way, is this: as I have typified these attitudes, Marx's belief leads to neither. However, in modified forms both attitudes, together, are compatible with the belief, and, together, follow from it.

An initial question could be raised concerning the legitimacy of the two categories of quietistic attitude and activistic attitude on the basis of whether in practice it is possible to hold one position or the other consistently over long periods of time. I would suspect not, but for the sake of argument I have accepted them, as tenuous as their actual existence may be, in order to underline this particular interpretation of Marx.

In its extreme form, a quietistic attitude is incompatible with a Marxist understanding of history. Although certain circumstances are determined independently of men's wills and, in this sense, man is powerless in the face of historical 'forces', man is also a determining force whose activity is effective. The importance and, indeed, the necessity of human activity is clearly recognized in the structural principle of overdetermination: human activism brings about conjecture.¹

Similarly, in its extreme form, an activistic attitude is also incompatible with a Marxist understanding of history. Although certain circumstances are brought about by man's volition, there are circumstances which are determined "independently of men's will". In Marx there is a recognition that men are limited in their capacity to effect history; all history is not the result of men's will.

¹See p. 32 ff.

Within Marx's dialectical approach to history, man is determined as well as determining, both created, and creator. Thus, the extreme forms of the activist attitude and the quietist attitude each treat only one aspect of the dialectical relation. A modification of the two attitudes is the only solution to the dilemma. In a different form, fused into a unity, both originally separate attitudes are compatible and seem to follow from the Marxist position. Within this fusion, the quietist attitude recognizes man as determined, created; the activist attitude recognizes man as determining, creator.

The development of capitalism and the breakdown follow certain laws. But these laws must be understood as tendencies. Breakdown is inevitable because the tendencies of the developing principal contradiction are present. That contradiction can be resolved only by revolution, the transforming of capitalist society. It is men in their political practice who must bring about this transformation.

At one level, the theoretical level, the contradictory development of capitalism, as reflected in its laws (or tendencies), will lead to breakdown. This does not in any way deny that human activity is present and necessary. At another level, the level of political practice, we can also see both objective determinants in a political situation and the necessity of political action. A belief in the breakdown is not a belief in a breakdown at a particular point in time but a belief in eventual or inevitable breakdown. That belief, in Marx's dialectical form, is based both on historical tendencies and human volition. In practice, historical tendencies are realized or limited in certain ways as a result of human volition; and also in practice, human volition is realized or limited in certain ways as a result of historical tendencies. For Marx, the historical tendencies of capitalism are being worked out continuously. Men will determine the specific character of the breakdown conjuncture in the situation conveyed to them in history.

In the Marxist tradition, strong criticisms have been levelled within the context of political practice against those who would con-

sider opting out of political action. In the following attack, Engels correctly suggests that complete abstention from political activity is impossible:

Complete abstention from political action is impossible. The abstentionist press participates in politics every day. It is only a question of how one does it, and of what politics one engages in. For the rest, to us abstention is impossible. The working-class party functions as a party in most countries by now, and it is not for us to ruin it by preaching abstention. Living experience, the political expression of the existing governments compels the workers to occupy themselves with politics whether they like it or not, be it for political or for social goals. To preach abstention to them is to throw them into the embrace of bourgeois politics. The morning after the Paris Commune, which has made proletarian political action an order of the day, abstention is entirely out of the question.¹

In the context of political practice there are definite dangers attached to a radically activist attitude or a radically quietistic attitude. The danger of quietism is obvious: it does not recognize the need for political action. It is an alienated view of political activity, and can, as Engels suggests, be traced to bourgeois ideology.

The dangers of activism are equally severe. There are times in history when action will be of no avail, wasteful, and even harmful; these are times when, in spite of the action, "It could not be otherwise", as Marx wrote.² Note this criticism by Marx of the "Left" factions of the Communist Party in 1850:

The minority (the 'left' faction) substitutes dogmatism for the standpoint of criticism and, idealism for materialism. It treats pure will as the motive power of revolution instead of actual conditions. While we say to the workers: 'You have got to go through fifteen, twenty, fifty years of civil wars and national wars not merely in order to change your conditions but in order to change yourselves and become qualified for political power', you on the contrary tell them, 'We must achieve power immediately, otherwise we may as well lie down and go to sleep'. While we specifically point out

¹Frederick Engels, "Apropos of Working-Class Political Action", Selected Works, p.314.

²Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Selected Works, p.102.

the underdeveloped nature of the German proletariat to the German workers, you flatter the national feelings and craft prejudices of the German handicraftsman in the crudest way, which is of course more popular. Just as the democrats turned the word 'people' into a sacred being, so you have done with the word 'proletariat'. Like the Democrats you substitute revolutionary phrases for revolutionary development, etc.¹

In the contemporary situation, this criticism is levelled also, in one form or another, at elements of the "New Left".

Activism in its extreme form disposes of one of the most essential elements of the Marxist interpretation: an acknowledgement that in the overdetermined situation, the 'concrete' are the realization of underlying laws (or tendencies). It is the task of the revolutionary to perceive these laws and act with a full understanding of them according to the demands of the particular historical situation. It is within this context that the revolutionary can achieve freedom.

Towards the end of Capital Marx writes:

In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane consideration ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the actual sphere of material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite.²

¹Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Correspondence, 1846-1895: A Selection with Commentary and Notes (New York: 1934), p.92(n).

²Marx, Capital, Vol.III, p.820.

We must also recognize that in particular historical situations, the things people think they are doing may not be what they are actually doing, considered from a different point of view. It was a great contribution of Marx to point out the 'ideological screen' which makes it very difficult for men to get a clear view of what they are doing from other than a subjective point of view. By clearing the way to understanding the relation of ideology to the mode and relations of production, he was able to show the effect on human activity of man's essence as a social being. Although human beings are, at one level, individuals involved in a particular social practice in a particular circumstance, they are at another level, embodiments of a certain social class, something which they as social beings within capitalism, for example, cannot avoid:

My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively rise above them.¹

Of course, at another level, man must be treated differently. Man does have choice, and in so far as he has this freedom he has with it the social responsibility for his actions. Marx is clear in distinguishing the processes of abstraction and the attributing of social responsibility:

I paint the capitalist and the landlord in no sense couleur de rose. But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests.²

At the practical level, the level of strategy and tactics, we find very little difficulty in the problem posed by this essay. It is when this issue in human practice is 'ripped' out of its social context and dealt with on a level abstracted and isolated from practice that a 'philosophical problem' arises. Within the Marxist problematic, this problem

¹Marx, Capital, Vol.I, p.10.

²Ibid., Vol.I, p.10.

and related ones are the result of ideological distortion of matters solved within social practice and understanding of that practice. Viewed in this way, the approach to solving the problem is changed. More interesting now are questions like "Who is it that is asking the question?" "In what context is it being asked?" "Why is it being asked?" "How did the question arise?"

The following quotation from Antonio Gramsci gives an excellent example of the relation between social practice and the ideological distortion which has been mentioned earlier.

. . . the determinist, fatalist element has been an immediate ideological "aroma" of the philosophy of praxis, a form of religion and a stimulant (but like a drug) necessitated and historically justified by the "subordinate" character of certain social strata. When one does not have the initiative in the struggle and the struggle is ultimately identified with a series of defeats, mechanical determinism becomes a formidable power of moral resistance, of cohesion and of patient and obstinate perseverance. "I am defeated for the moment but the nature of things is on my side in the long run", etc. Real will is disguised as an act of faith, a sure rationality of history, a primitive and impassioned form of impassioned finalism which appear as a substitute for the predestination, providence etc., of the confessional religions. We must insist on the fact that even in such cases there exists in reality a strong active will We must stress the fact that fatalism has only been a cover by the weak for an active and real will. This is why it is always necessary to show the futility of mechanical determinism, which, explicable as a naive philosophy of the masses, becomes a cause of passivity, of imbecile self-sufficiency, when it is made into a reflective and coherent philosophy on the part of the intellectuals.¹

This essay has attempted to come to gain an understanding of Marxist problematic, which is essentially anti-metaphysical and historical, in order to deal with the problem of quietism and activism (or social determinism). The main portion of the argument has been directed towards showing how human practice and an understanding of that

¹Antonio Gramsci, Opere, Vol.II, Il materialismo storico e la filosofia de Benedetto Croce, pp.13-14, The Modern Prince, pp.69-70, quoted in Althusser, For Marx, p.105 n. See also Franz Marek, Philosophy of World Revolution, translated by Daphne Simon (New York: International Publishers, 1969), p.35. And compare with Stalin's position discussed in Marek, p.31.

practice can dissolve the posed problem. Since there has been somewhat greater attention paid to an understanding of human practice rather than the practice itself, I would like to draw out a few points on the latter before concluding.

Earlier in the essay has been mentioned the dialectical interaction of subject and object in history which defines practice. Marx deals with this point forcefully:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men that change circumstances and that the educator himself needs educating. Hence this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, of which one is superior to society (in Robert Owen, for example).

The coincidence of the changing circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice.¹

In political practice, both theoretically and practically, we come to understand the laws of society. In other words, practice itself generates knowledge. This implies, in the political arena, that men must be active as revolutionaries in order to come to know the society. The 'iron' laws may give confidence and inspiration since "history is on our side", but coming to understand the character and actual instances of these laws in a given situation requires not only observation, but participation in revolutionary activity, especially class struggle.

The particular importance of revolutionary practice is that it changes the participant. In this light, the activity of changing the world becomes a history of "continuous transformation of human nature".² Thus, for the revolutionary, the practice of changing the world must be the first priority for himself as a revolutionary. Very pointedly, Mao writes:

¹Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, III, Selected Works, p.28.

²Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, quoted in Sweezy, "The Transition to Socialism", p.2. See also pp.1-16.

If you want knowledge, you must take part in the practice of changing reality.¹

It is but one step further to Marx's very famous exhortation:

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.²

Marx's exhortation is not simply a call to action. In a deeper sense, Marx calls for the actual activity of changing the world because such practice is a learning experience. In trying to revolutionize the society, the revolutionary comes in conflict with the social structure. The struggle which ensues demands that the revolutionary 'comes to grips' with the actual functioning of the society, and learn from the experience, both mistaken and correct practice, or there will be no success. With experience, the revolutionary learns the nature of the society, the historical laws which are operative; and, as revolutionary activity progresses it becomes more clear which courses of action are necessary to follow in order to bring about social revolution. In historical terms, the actual experience of revolutionaries gives evidence that revolutionary struggle does, in fact, lay bare or demystify the real social and historical relationships in a society. In this context, we can see better what Marx means when he writes:

One nation should and can learn from others. And even when a society has got upon the right track for the discovery of the natural laws of its movement -- and it is the ultimate aim of this work, to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society -- it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by successive phases of its normal development. But it can shorten and lessen the birth pangs.³

The resolution of the problem posed in this essay is found in practice and a dialectical understanding of that practice. Positions which are not grounded in social practice will create problems for themselves. After all, it is possible for almost anyone to ask a question, the answer to which would be impossible, contradictory, absurd, or meaningless.

¹Mao, Selected Readings, p.59.

²Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, XI, Selected Works, p.30.

³Marx, Capital, Vol.I, pp.9-10.

Social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which mislead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.¹

¹Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, VIII, Selected Works, p.29.

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